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AN ILLUSTRATOR OF THE FIFTH GOSPEL:
DR. WILLIAM M. THOMSON.¹

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RENAN felicitously called Palestine the "fifth gospel." An understanding of it is certainly essential to an understanding of the four gospels, and its characteristics fully confirm their truthfulness. The unchanging land, and the unchanging people with their unchanging customs and modes of speech, enable one to understand the better what is recorded of the sayings and doings of Jesus in the land and among the people where he dwelt and labored in all the years of his earthly life. As a knowledge of the Old Testament is requisite to a proper understanding of the New Testament, so a knowledge of the characteristics and peculiarities of Palestine, or the "fifth gospel," with the manners and customs of the people of that land, which are much the same now as they were in the days of Jesus, is requisite to an understanding of the four historic gospels, with their message of life to dying men.

Many missionaries and travelers in all the Christian centuries have noted facts and supplied information tending to throw light on the pages of the New Testament by making the world better acquainted with Palestine and its people, and thus to enable all to profit by the teachings of the "fifth gospel." But it is unmistakably true that in the nineteenth century Christian missionaries have done more in this line than was done in twelve centuries before. And among these missionaries Americans have been foremost in gathering the needed facts, and in so presenting them as to make them helpful to the ordinary occidental reader.

Among these foremost helpers stands Rev. Dr. William M. Thomson, to whom the Christian world is indebted, and is

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glad to acknowledge its indebtedness, for his most important and helpful work, *The Land and the Book; or, Biblical Illustrations Drawn from the Manners and Customs, the Scenes and Scenery, of the Holy Land*. On this account, even if there were no other reason, American Bible lovers and friends of the missionary cause should be glad to know something of this devoted and helpful missionary in the East.

Dr. William M. Thomson was born in Ohio in 1806. At that time Ohio was "way out west" to New England, but today it is "well down east" to the real western states. Yet Ohio was always in one sense a New England state, a portion of it being actually known as "New Connecticut." The best characteristics of New England were found in the people of Ohio. Young Thomson was inclined to study. Having prepared himself for college, he entered Miami University, and he was graduated in 1826. He spent three years at Princeton Theological Seminary, and then offered himself as a missionary to the American Board. Being accepted, he was sent to Jerusalem, where he labored in 1832 and 1833. He then went to Beirût, which from that time was the center of his active missionary labors for forty-three years.

The earlier years of Dr. Thomson's labors in Syria and northern Palestine were formative years in that important field, and Dr. Thomson did good service in organizing local churches and schools and in preaching and teaching. Notwithstanding the fact that there were disturbances between the different Syrian sects, nine schools were kept up at Beirût and one at Jerusalem, while several outside stations were occupied successfully. Abeih is a mountain village about fifteen miles south of Beirût, facing the sea, with villages in all directions about it. Two rooms were fitted up for a chapel in a house at Abeih, occupied by Dr. Thomson, and there a service in Arabic was kept up for several years. A good Sunday school was held between the services. In this field Dr. Thomson did excellent work, and his influence for good was very great. Both Druses and Maronites of the outside population came to value this local missionary work and to appreciate the spirit and worth of the good men

who conducted it. They even consulted them concerning their own difficulties. It was said that Dr. Thomson had more friendly intercourse with the Maronite priesthood during his first residence at Abeih than during all his previous missionary life.

Thus what is thought to be peculiarly missionary work — preaching and teaching and organizing and training, and distributing the Scriptures and appropriate religious literature — was kept up actively and effectively by Dr. Thomson for all the years of an ordinary generation. Yet he did more; he did other work than all this. And the same, indeed, can be said of almost any other effective missionary or good Christian worker of any sort in the home or the foreign field. Rarely does any man do one work well who does not attempt anything outside of that one work. No man even reads or studies to advantage unless he interests himself, as a means of added power and of added good, in other lines than that which he deems the most important. “Prayer and provender [and needed rest and added good work] hinder no man.” While Dr. Thomson did a faithful and devoted missionary’s work in the line of what is ordinarily understood as missionary work, he has helped Bible students the world over by the light he has thrown by his writing on the Bible pages as studied by Christians at home.

Hardly any Bible lover in Great Britain or America would count his library reasonably complete or himself well furnished for Bible study or Bible teaching unless he had access to Dr. Thomson’s *The Land and the Book*. And young people think more of the Bible if they have the privilege of reading that book as they read or study the Bible. All realize more fully since that book was written the value of the land of which it tells, as throwing light on the Book of books which it treats. In an article, written at my request by Dr. Thomson for the weekly help to Bible study which I had the privilege to edit, he said on this very subject:

“A celebrated French writer [Renan], although a sadly skeptical one, says that he found the land to be a veritable fifth gospel, explaining and supplementing the other four. In many respects it is more than this. It illustrates and corroborates the

whole blessed Bible." Speaking of the numberless particulars in which the land tends to strengthen confidence in the truths of the Book, he says: "They were gathered into the land for that very purpose, and so arranged as most effectually to accomplish it. The divine Author of revelation, when he came to complete and fulfil it, did not need to create a new world in order to obtain the materials necessary to the accomplishment of his mission. He found them all there in Palestine ready to be appropriated; and we too have them to explain and enforce his divine teachings."

And, in the good providence of God, it was Dr. William M. Thomson who, while he was a missionary in that very land preaching the gospel to non-believers there, brought out so clearly the facts that illustrate this truth for the benefit of doubters and of glad believers in this home Christian land. And this is another evidence of what we have gained from foreign missions and missionaries. As to the relative importance of this piece of work by Dr. Thomson, the *Bibliotheca Sacra* says of it: "If the Syrian mission had produced no other fruit, the churches which have supported it would have received in this book an ample return for all they have expended It is a book of travels, a book of conversations, a running comment on the Scriptures, and a pictorial geography and history of Palestine all in one." It was hardly less popular and useful in England than in America; and it was but a forerunner of a number of other books by other eastern travelers in the same general field; but that only made it the more valuable. Dr. Thomson was nearly fifty years gathering the material for this volume; and yet it was only an added item beyond what is called a missionary's chief work in his field.

In 1877 Dr. Thomson returned to America. For some time he lived with his son, a prominent physician and an instructor in the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York city. The veteran missionary was engaged at the time in an enlarged edition of his great work on Palestine and Syria, richly illustrated, afterward published in New York and London. His son conducted for years a large and most interesting Bible class on

Sunday afternoons in the hall of the Young Men's Christian Association. Many medical students and adult Christian men, as well as others desirous of Bible knowledge, were in the habit of attending that Bible class. As the leader was born in the Holy Land and had been brought up there, the Bible was a living book to him in its setting and in its contents, and he could present its facts and teachings most vividly.

It was good to meet the author of *The Land and the Book* when he came back from the foreign field in the maturity of his vigorous age. He was then only a little more than threescore and ten, and his brain and heart were still bearing fruit in age. His training and habit of thought, together with his lovely and loving spirit, made him easy and winsome as a conversationalist, and his words out of rich experience made him ever an instructive speaker.

His later years were passed with relatives in Denver, Colo., and I had occasion to know some years after he passed away that his memory was there kept green and precious by all who knew him as he was. His earthly life closed in Denver, in 1894. He was a cosmopolitan in his life-course: born and reared near the Alleghany range, the larger portion of his life was passed at the foot of the mountains of Lebanon; he closed his eyes to earth on the slope of the Rocky Mountain range; and he opened his spiritual eyes upon the eternal hills of God. He was favored to live such a life, to die such a death, and to do so much for all of us—whom he loved because we are loved of God.